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Hoopeston officer tells of life in Louisiana after Katrina

A local man has seen the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina up close.

Hoopeston Police Officer Jeremy Welch left Sept. 3 for New Orleans, part of the Illinois Law Enforcement Alarm System (ILEAS).

After being deputized as a Louisiana State Trooper, Welch and other volunteers spent three weeks keeping order in New Orleans. "Things got pretty interesting the first few days," he said.

He was part of the team that assisted in capturing a murder suspect and accomplice but despite that, Welch said he was involved in "nothing even remotely life-threatening as far as I was concerned."

"I can say now I've seen the actual very best and very worst of people," Welch said at the Oct. 4 Hoopeston Neighborhood Watch meeting.

Calling looting "awful," Welch said high end jewelry and clothing stores were among those hardest hit. "I've never seen anything like that in my life," he said. "They even took clothes off the mannequins. Bath and Body Works, however, was untouched."

Some suspects were housed in an old Greyhound Bus station. "As jails go, it wasn't the best but they were dry and they were fed," Welch said. Bond for suspects was set routinely at \$20,000 each to help keep them off the streets.

He even snuck a peek into the Super Dome, where thousands of Louisianans were housed after Katrina. "It was not a pretty sight," he said.

Welch said he was lucky that his duty did not involve being in standing water. Despite the water, Welch said there were no mosquitoes, adding that after hurricanes, the insects are often scarce. "I never saw a single snack and believe me, I was looking," he said.

While he wasn't in the water, the stench from it was unmistakable. "I have a whole new appreciation for



Jeremy Welch, background, listens to Marty Parsons after the Neighborhood Watch meeting.

what smells bad," Welch said.

Asked why people did not want to leave their homes before the hurricane hit, Welch said people wanted to stay in "their little slice of heaven." Many of the resident who stayed were armed, causing officers to exercise caution. "The last thing you want to do is get in an armed conflict with a guy who's just trying to protect what he's got," he said.

It was only some people who caused problems, Welch
See KATRINA on other side

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Other items

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Katrina continued from other side

said. "You can't talk about things like that without talking about all the good people you met down there, which was just about everybody," he said. One of the first Louisiana officers Welch rode with offered to house and feed him during his stay. In fact, a lot of people offered to feed Welch and his comrades. "I didn't miss a meal after I crossed the Louisiana state line, I'll tell you that," he said. The food was good, and good incentive to return. "I'd go again just for the food," Welch said. "I'd go again tomorrow."

It is the acts of kindness that Welch experienced and saw that he will remember most about his time in New Orleans. He spoke fondly of one Louisiana officer, part of a convoy, who stopped the line of vehicles, transferred his supplies to another vehicle in the fleet and loaded his car with dog and cat food from a PetSmart store. He filled individual bags and delivered them throughout the night. "I bet he dispensed 500 lbs. of dog food in a 12-hour shift," Welch said. "He was a great big bear of a man going around feeding strays."

It is also dogs that represent the worst of Welch's trip. "What haunts me most is when you drive through the streets of New Orleans and all you hear is dogs howling," he said. "It's like a ghost town."

Louisiana residents seemed thankful of the efforts of police and those who donated supplies and money. "Everybody I talked to seemed to be very appreciative of the effort," Welch said. "They realized they weren't alone; the grief and the destruction were widespread."

Welch was one of five Hoopston officers - including Chief Mark Drollinger - who volunteered for Katrina duty but was the only one who went. ILEAS did not request more participation from Hoopston in its second wave to the area.

As for why he wanted to go, "it had to do with the other people who said they would go," he said. "You find yourself surrounded by the very best people and that's a draw for me."

Weather



Cloudy today. High 64. Tonight, chance of rain. Low 51. Tomorrow, mostly cloudy. High 66, low 51.

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